



# BASIC HUNTING

FOR COMMON MISSOURI GAME SPECIES

# SQUIRREL





## Acknowledgements

Portions of this publication have been adapted from the August 2013 *Missouri Conservationist* article, "Squirrel Hunting: Getting Started," by Mark Goodwin.



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## FOR COMMON MISSOURI GAME SPECIES

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# SQUIRREL

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Squirrels don't receive a lot of attention from today's hunters, who focus on other game, such as deer and turkeys. Deer and turkeys are big game, while squirrels may be the very definition of small game. Similarly, many older hunters can remember when deer and turkeys were few, while squirrel populations have always been plentiful.

Few game species are as widespread and underused across Missouri as squirrels. Squirrel hunting was very popular several decades ago. In 1972, more than 218,000 hunters harvested just over 3.1 million squirrels, but today, it's common to have the woods to yourself. In 2016, just over 56,000 hunters harvested just over 600,000 squirrels. Squirrel hunting is a great way to introduce beginners to hunting. No specialized gear is needed; opportunities are abundant; and

stealth and silence are not as critical as for deer or turkey hunting. Hunting squirrels is a great sport for seasoned hunters too. It hones observation skills and marksmanship, and it offers a chance to scout for other game such as deer or turkey. And, of course, a successful hunt results in some wonderful table fare.

Additionally, the hunting season for squirrels is one of Missouri's longest, extending from late May through mid-February; the bag limit of 10 squirrels a day is liberal; and practically any stand of mixed hardwood timber of a few acres or more will support squirrel populations suitable for hunting. If you have overlooked squirrels as a hunting opportunity, reconsider. This booklet includes more on Missouri's common squirrels, tips on getting started, and cleaning and preparing your harvest.





# BIOLOGY OF COMMON MISSOURI SQUIRREL SPECIES

Missouri's most common squirrels, the eastern gray squirrel and the eastern fox squirrel, are of the family Sciuridae in the order Rodentia.

## Description and Size

The eastern gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) is slender and smaller than the fox squirrel, with white tail fringe and belly. Its back and sides are gray (rarely reddish or all black), and its total length — from the tip of its nose to tip of its tail — averages 14–21 inches. A full-grown adult weighs between  $\frac{3}{4}$  and 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. Sometimes black-pelted squirrels occur in the same litter with gray ones; these may be entirely glossy black or show various gradations between black and gray. Albino

individuals occur occasionally; in some instances where this characteristic is common in the genetics of a local population, small colonies of albinos may exist.

The eastern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*) is heavy-bodied and larger than the gray squirrel. Its tail fringe, belly, back and sides are reddish yellow, with some gray mixed in the back and sides. Its total length averages 19–29 inches, and adults weigh between 1 and 3 pounds. In Missouri, black or albino individuals rarely occur.

Other members of the squirrel family (Sciuridae) living in Missouri include the eastern chipmunk, woodchuck, thirteen-lined ground squirrel, Franklin's ground squirrel, and southern flying squirrel. None of these are likely to be confused with the eastern gray or eastern fox squirrels.



*Eastern fox squirrel (Sciurus niger)*





## Human Connections

Missouri hunters take between 600,000 to 700,000 squirrels annually, with automobiles also being a common human-related cause of death. For many people, especially those in urban areas where there are fewer wildlife viewing opportunities, squirrels provide considerable viewing enjoyment. Economically, squirrels do some harm by their inroads on cornfields. They may girdle ornamental trees, particularly in early spring when they gnaw the inner bark. Occasionally, they damage the insulation on outdoor electrical wiring and frequently become a nuisance when they gain access to the attics of homes.

## Habitat and Conservation

Gray squirrels, sometimes referred to simply as “grays,” are more common in bottomlands and rivers with a bushy understory, while the fox squirrel, or “foxes,” are more likely to be found along higher ridges. In the prairie regions of the state, fox squirrels are found along the few remaining Osage orange hedge fences, in farm woodlots, along timbered fence rows, and in timbered draws. Both species also live in urban areas, especially where large oak and hickory trees are common.

## Foods

The squirrel’s varied diet includes roughly 100 different species of plants, but only a few are considered important staples: nuts; fruits and buds of hickory, pecan, walnut, elm, and mulberry trees; and field corn. Fluctuations in the squirrel population are tied to the availability of acorn and nut crops, with these winter staples strongly influencing the physical condition of the females that must produce the next year’s young.

## Distribution in Missouri

Both gray and fox squirrels occur throughout Missouri, with the gray squirrel being more abundant in the Ozark and Mississippi Lowland regions, and the fox squirrel favoring the northern and western plains.

## Life Cycle

Gray squirrels have two mating seasons: late December through early February and late May through early July. Pregnancy requires about 45 days, with the season’s first litters born in February or March, and second litters born in July or August. Litters range from one to eight young, with an average of two to three. The young are hairless at birth, have their eyes and ears closed, and possess well-developed claws. They come out of the nest for the first time at 6–7 weeks of age, and are weaned within another week or so. In fox squirrels, the cycle is similar, but they begin breeding 10 days to two weeks earlier than the grays.

## Ecosystem Connections

Squirrels’ habit of storing nuts in the ground results in eventual germination of many unrecovered nuts. Their growth into trees furnish not only food and shelter for subsequent squirrel populations, but also timber of economic value to humans. Predators of squirrels include coyotes, foxes, domestic cats and dogs, bobcats, raccoons, owls, hawks, and tree-climbing snakes.





# BEFORE THE HUNT



## Squirrel Hunting Regulations

Missouri's rules regulating squirrel hunting are part of the *Wildlife Code of Missouri*. The *Code* outlines the length of the season, bag limits, approved methods and restrictions. It is important to be familiar with the *Code* before heading out to hunt. It was developed to help manage Missouri's valuable plant and animal communities, to provide equal opportunity to share and enjoy these resources, and to promote public safety. It is reviewed regularly, and, when necessary, it is amended. Changes to the *Code* are frequently suggested by the public and reviewed by MDC research biologists and wildlife managers to determine how the suggested changes will affect wildlife populations. Additional information on the updated *Code* and links to it can be found online at [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZJ8](https://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZJ8).

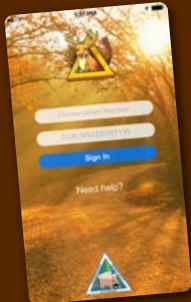






### Free MO Hunting App

Use your smartphone to purchase, view, and store annual hunting permits. You can even use it to notch your permit and Telecheck your harvest directly from your permit within the application. Get it in Android or iPhone platforms at [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZoQ](https://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZoQ).



## Permits

Although some exceptions apply, most people wanting to hunt squirrel in Missouri will need to purchase a Small Game Hunting Permit or Small Game Hunting and Fishing Permit. These permits can be purchased online, over the phone, at your local MDC office, or from participating vendors — typically outdoors and sporting goods stores. Details concerning these and other permits are available online at [huntfish.mdc.mo.gov/hunting-trapping/permits](https://huntfish.mdc.mo.gov/hunting-trapping/permits).

To qualify for these permits, hunters born after Jan. 1, 1967, must be hunter-education certified. Missouri's hunter education course covers hunter responsibility and ethics; firearm operation and safety; wildlife identification and game care; outdoor survival and first aid; firearm handling and hunting techniques; and wildlife conservation and management. Classes can be taken in person, through self-study, or online. More information on hunter education certification — including exemptions — is available online at [short.mdc.mo.gov/Z45](https://short.mdc.mo.gov/Z45).

## Finding a Place to Hunt

With a range that includes all of Missouri, anyone wishing to hunt squirrels should not have to go far. Those locations offering the best squirrel hunting fall into three categories: public land, private land with open public access, and private land with restricted access.

### Public Land

Public land in Missouri is owned and managed by a variety of organizations, but most of the land open to hunting is managed by MDC or the U.S. Forest Service. Public areas have many benefits, including being open to hunting by anyone with the appropriate hunting permits. Public hunting areas, which are spread throughout the state, provide relatively easy access to hunting opportunities. Locate a conservation area near you by visiting [mdc.mo.gov/atlas](https://mdc.mo.gov/atlas). Additional information on hunting opportunities on U.S. Forest Service property is available online at [fs.usda.gov/activity/mtnf/recreation/hunting](https://fs.usda.gov/activity/mtnf/recreation/hunting).

### Private Land with Public Access

Through MDC's Missouri Outdoor Recreational Access Program (MRAP), private landowners open their property for public use. These properties allow varying levels of activities, ranging from all-access hunting and fishing to wildlife viewing only. More information on MRAP areas, including locations and approved activities, is available online at [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZpJ](https://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZpJ).

### Private Land

With more than 93 percent of land in Missouri being privately owned, the bulk of hunting opportunities is on private land. Unlike the public land described above, most private property is not managed for wildlife habitat, but many species, such as squirrels, have adapted to these other uses. Private land offers a number of benefits, including the ability of the property owner to limit the number of hunters allowed on the property. It is important to have permission before hunting on private property. Suggestions to help in approaching landowners for permission to hunt on their property is available online at [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZZa](https://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZZa).





## Scouting

Missouri's squirrel season is long, running from late spring through late winter. Squirrel behavior changes throughout the year as they respond to differences in weather and food availability. For example, midday activity will often be different in winter than in summer, as squirrels forage or rest according to temperature. Likewise, a mulberry tree full of fruit could be a hotspot in June, but by October squirrels will be feeding on nuts and acorns. Be observant and adapt your hunting according to what the squirrels are doing or eating. Common squirrel foods change by season:



**Spring:** Buds, twigs, flowers, mushrooms, and the seeds of elms, maples, and oaks



**Summer:** Mulberries, hickory nuts, acorns, corn, walnuts, wild grapes, mushrooms, and Osage oranges (hedgeapples)

**Fall:** Hickory nuts, pecans, acorns, walnuts, corn, and Osage oranges (hedgeapples)

**Winter:** Nuts, acorns, bark, corn, and buds

## Squirrel Dens

Gray and fox squirrels use both leaf nests and den cavities. Cavity nests are most often in the hollow trunk or large limb of a live tree, but squirrels will also use cavities in dead snags. Cavity nests are used more in the winter and during the spring reproductive period. These locations are warmer, more sheltered from weather and predators, and help keep the young protected. Leaf nests tend to receive more use in summer, perhaps because they're cooler than den nests. Hunters should not shoot into leaf nests and should avoid shooting squirrels peeking out of cavities, where they are unlikely to be recovered.

MDC's *Small Game Hunting Prospects*, which includes information on small game, natural history, management, and hunting, is available online at [short.mdc.mo.gov/Zon](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/Zon).





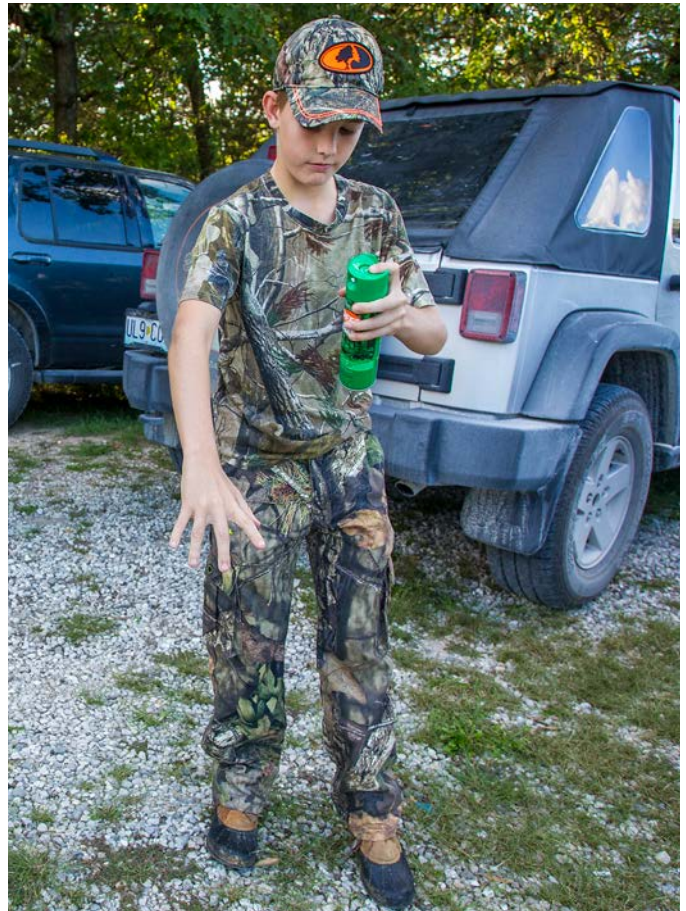
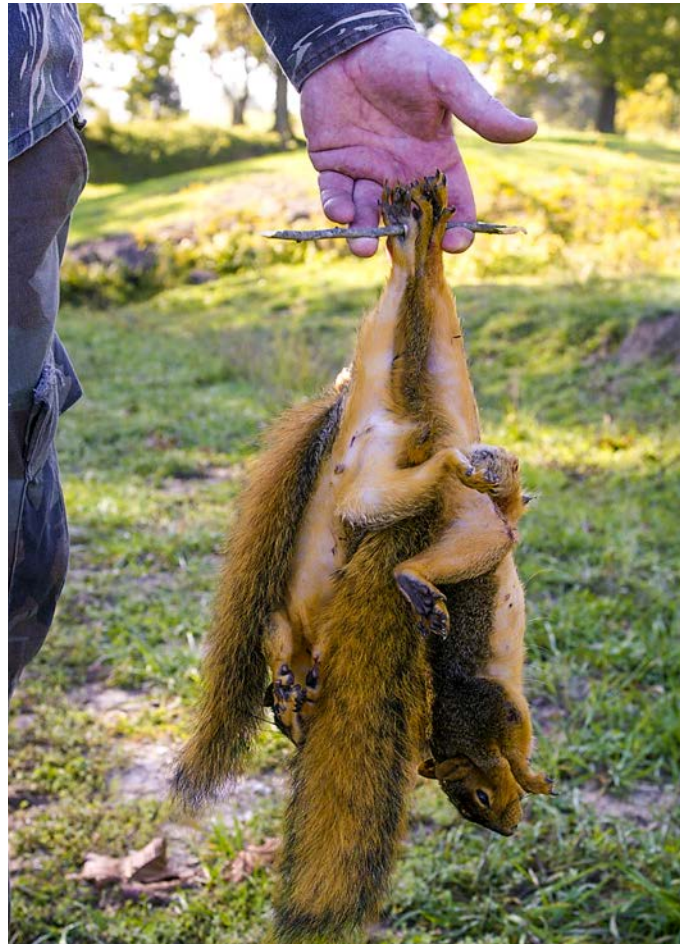
# Gear and Firearms

Equipment and clothing for squirrel hunting is simple. During the warmer months, light camouflage is in order. For safety, a hunter orange cap is a good idea. If the hat compromises your approach, take it off and lay it on the ground. If you have already harvested a few squirrels, lay the hat on the ground alongside your squirrels as a good way to find them.

An easy way to carry squirrels is to cut a hole in one of the hind feet, then thread them on a small stick cut to 3 or 4 inches and sharpened on both ends. The stick fits well across your fingers.

Up until the killing frosts of November and early December, squirrel hunters must deal with ticks, chiggers, and mosquitoes. You may want to treat your clothes with a permethrin-based spray, which kills ticks, as well as a DEET-based spray, which you can spray on your clothes and skin to repel ticks, chiggers, and mosquitoes. Or take other measures to avoid bites from these pests. If you are allergic to poison ivy and need a refresher on what it looks like, visit the online Field Guide at [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZcW](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZcW).

Most squirrel hunters choose to hunt with either a scoped .22-caliber long rifle or a shotgun. A .22 rifle, if all shots are limited to the head, leaves squirrels in fine shape for cooking. The shooting is quite challenging. Shotguns are a great choice for hunting squirrels, though efforts must be made to reduce the chance of riddling squirrels with pellets. Use large shot size, like No. 4, which limits the number of pellets. Learn your shotgun's pattern at different ranges and hold your aim in front of a squirrel so you just hit the squirrel's head with the edge of your pattern. Also, try to limit shots to when only the squirrel's head is visible, like when it peeks from behind a limb. For an added degree of difficulty some hunters choose to pursue squirrels with a muzzleloading rifle or a scoped .22-caliber pistol.





# DURING THE HUNT



## Primary Safety Rules

- Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction
- Always positively identify your target and what is beyond it before firing
- Always keep your safety on until you are ready to shoot
- Always keep your finger outside the trigger guard until you are ready to shoot

## Hunting Strategy

The key to hunting any game animal is placing yourself where the animals are when they are active. Doing so requires knowledge of the animals you hunt.

In the morning, they emerge from their leaf nests or den trees and are active for two or three hours, primarily feeding. Gray squirrels are early risers and become active at sunrise, while fox squirrels tend to come out later in the morning. By midday, both tend to loaf on limbs or sleep, especially during the heat of summer. During the last two or three hours of daylight, they are active again, feeding until close to dark, at which time they return to their leaf nests or dens for the night. During the breeding seasons, squirrels are often active all day, with male squirrels fighting among themselves or chasing females.

Both gray and fox squirrels make a variety of sounds. To express excitement and warn other squirrels, they give a rapid call that sounds like “cherk-cherk-cherk.” Other calls include grunts, purrs, and chattering of teeth, the meaning of which vary.

Weather conditions and time of day are important concerns when planning a squirrel hunt. During warm months, watch

the weather forecast. If morning temps are predicted to be in the 60s or lower, you will have several hours of comfortable hunting if you start hunting at first light. If temps are forecast with lows in the 70s, it’s best to postpone hunting for another day. By early morning it will already be warm and uncomfortable in the woods.

Wind is another consideration. Windy days put limbs in motion, which make it difficult to spot squirrels as they feed and move in the trees. Days with little to no wind provide the best squirrel hunting conditions. Mornings are often preferable, because winds tend to be lighter.

Once you have located concentrations of squirrels, hunting strategy follows two methods: sitting in one spot and waiting for squirrels to move and reveal their presence; and still-hunting, which involves quietly walking through the woods, with frequent stops to look and listen for squirrels. If you are still-hunting for squirrels, pause to look every 10 steps or so. If you end up just walking through the woods, you will miss many squirrels. Those new to squirrel hunting should remember to move slowly through the woods, scanning the





treetops for movement, and listening for the sounds of squirrels jumping from limb to limb or cutting and dropping nut hulls. Upon finding a lot of fresh cuttings on the ground, find a comfortable spot nearby and sit down awhile — you'll usually have a shot or two shortly.

With either method, sit or move with the sun at your back. This makes it easier for you to spot squirrels and more difficult for squirrels to spot you.

Frequently, squirrels will be too far away for a good shot, requiring you to move to get closer. Move when the squirrel is actively reaching for nuts or chasing another squirrel. Being distracted, the squirrel will be less likely to see you. Use the trunks of larger trees and the leafy limbs of smaller ones to hide your approach.

If squirrels are not active, a good way to make them reveal themselves is to shake the limb of an understory tree and bark like a squirrel. This will often cause them to bark back. You can use the same strategy to get a squirrel feeding at the top of a leafy tree to come down and take a look, putting it in better range for a good shot.

## Using Squirrel Calls

### *Distress Calls*

When a squirrel is being attacked it will utter a panicky, wheezing whistle that alerts other squirrels in the area. The others respond by coming out of their dens and harassing the attacker with chirps, barks, and chirring noises. The distress call is best used near the largest den trees. Begin calling while scratching on the ground with a leafy branch or sapling. The idea is to make it sound as if a squirrel is being attacked. Other squirrels will come out and begin barking at the intruder, sometimes offering a shot as they jump from tree to tree in order to drive the intruder away.

### *Feeding Calls*

These are the most common calls made by squirrels. They may be territorial calls, or they may be announcing to other squirrels in the area that good foraging has been discovered. The feeding call is made using a hand-operated bellows-type call, which can be operated by slapping the bellows on a tree or the ground, or even by tapping it on your leg or gunstock. Stand near a large nut-producing tree and begin calling, slowly at first and then increasing. Watch for squirrels coming silently through the treetops from all directions. Shoot when an opportunity presents itself, but don't pick up dead game until it's obvious that no more squirrels are coming. Done properly, it's possible to shoot several squirrels in one session.

To get the best results, squirrel calls must be performed correctly at the correct times. Read the instructions carefully before using one.



# AFTER THE HUNT

## After a Successful Hunt

### Excessive waste

It is illegal to intentionally leave or abandon any portion of any wildlife that is commonly used as human food.

### Possessing, transporting, and storing wildlife

You must keep any wildlife you take separate or identifiable from that of any other hunter.

You can possess and transport wildlife as part of your personal baggage. It may be stored at your home, camp, place of lodging, or in a commercial establishment.

### Proper labeling

When storing wildlife other than deer or turkey, it's label must include several pieces of information:

- Hunter's full name
- Hunter's address
- Hunter's permit number
- Species
- Date it was placed in storage

When transporting wildlife other than deer or turkey, it must also be labeled with specific information:

- Hunter's full name
- Hunter's address
- Hunter's permit number
- Date it was taken





# How to Clean a Squirrel

Squirrels are just like other game — the meat on the table is only as good as the care taken in preparation. The drawings below will help you skin a squirrel properly.

## Skinning a Squirrel

**1** Soak or spray the squirrel with water and pluck the hair from the base of the tail. Removing the hair at the beginning makes the following steps easier.



**2** Cut through the base of the tailbone being careful not to cut the hide on top of the rump. Cutting or pulling the tail off will make this process more difficult.



**3** Place the back legs on a board, stump, or flat rock. Place your foot on the squirrel's hind feet and extend the cut toward the head about ½ to 1 inch.



**4** Make an angled cut in front of each hind leg down toward the belly.



**5** Pull up on tail.



**6** Peel the hide toward the head exposing both front legs to the foot joint.



**7** Stand on the tail and pull the remaining hide down from the belly to the back feet. Pull the front legs through to the foot joint and cut the front feet off. Remove the head and both hind feet.



**8** Make sure the carcass is free of hair. Start between the hind legs and cut along the center of the belly continuing to the neck. Be careful not to cut the entrails.



**9** Remove the entrails and wash the body cavity.



SQUIRREL CLEANING ILLUSTRATIONS: MARK RAITHEL





# Cooking and Eating



BERNADETTE DRYDEN

## BOONE COUNTY BURGOO WITH SQUIRREL

### *Ingredients*

2 pounds squirrel meat (about 4 squirrels)  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
6 cups water  
1 cup white hominy  
1½ cups lima beans (or other dried beans)  
1 cup diced potatoes  
2 carrots, diced  
2 stalks celery, chopped  
1 cup chopped onion  
1 bay leaf  
1 cup sliced okra (or fresh green beans)  
1 to 2 red bell peppers, diced (or combination of sweet and hot roasted peppers)  
1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes  
1 cup fresh corn kernels  
1½ to 2 teaspoons salt  
½ teaspoon (or more) coarsely ground black pepper  
½ to 1 teaspoon chile powder (depending upon desired heat)  
½ teaspoon red-pepper sauce, such as Tabasco  
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

### *Instructions*

Clean 3 or 4 squirrels to obtain 2 pounds of meat on the bone. Rub the meat with salt and pepper and broil the whole squirrels for about 30 minutes (keeping squirrels about 8 inches from the heating element). Turn halfway through to brown both sides. Alternatively, you may put your squirrels in a large pot, cover them with water, and boil them for 2 to 3 hours (older squirrels take longer to cook until tender). Debone and cut into bite-sized pieces.

Heat oil in the bottom of a big pot and brown squirrel pieces for 4 or 5 minutes, turning them frequently. Add water to the pot and then the hominy, lima beans, potatoes, carrots, celery, onion and bay leaf. Simmer for 1 hour and skim off grease (if any).

Add okra, bell pepper, tomatoes, corn, salt, pepper, chile powder, Tabasco and Worcestershire sauces. Bring the stew back to a boil, stir well, and reduce heat. Simmer, partially covered for 2 more hours or until it is as thick as you like.



## SKILLET SQUIRREL

### Ingredients

2 squirrels  
Flour  
2 large onions, chopped  
1 clove garlic, minced  
¼ cup red wine  
½ large green pepper, halved  
½ pound fresh morel or button mushrooms, sliced  
¼–½ cup sour cream  
1 can, cream of mushroom soup  
Salt  
Pepper

### Instructions

Dredge squirrel in flour and brown pieces in an electric skillet. Smother browned meat in chopped onions. Add garlic, salt, pepper, red wine, soup, mushrooms, sour cream and green pepper. Put the lid on and simmer (about 225 F) until the onions are clear and the meat is tender.

## SQUIRREL COUNTRY SAUSAGE

### Ingredients

4 ½ pounds squirrel (approx. 15 fox squirrels)  
1 tablespoon sage  
2 ½ pounds fresh seasoned pork sausage (with sage)  
2 teaspoons basil  
1 large onion  
2–3 teaspoons margarine  
3 cloves garlic  
1 tablespoon chili powder  
4 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped  
1 tablespoon black pepper  
2 tablespoon salt  
1 teaspoon thyme

### Instructions

Bone the squirrel and grind or chop in food processor. (Squirrel leg meat is full of tendons and may not grind easily, but will be fine chopped in food processor.) Mix together with fresh pork.

Mince the onion and garlic. Cook the onion until transparent and add the garlic and sauté slightly. Mix together meats, onion, garlic, and herbs.

To test seasonings, form a small patty and cook. Taste and adjust seasonings accordingly.

Package and freeze in meal-size servings. When thawing for use, form into small patties to cook or grill or use with your favorite sausage recipes. Great on pizza, with pancakes, or scrambled in eggs.

## ROSEMARY PARMESAN SQUIRREL

### Ingredients

3 squirrels, cut in pieces  
2 cups flour  
Olive oil  
¼ cup white wine (white zinfandel or Liebfraumilch)  
1 teaspoon rosemary  
¼ cup sun-dried tomatoes (chopped coarsely)  
¼ teaspoon salt  
¼ teaspoon coarse black pepper  
2 chicken bouillon cubes  
Brown rice (for 4 servings)  
¾ cup cream or half and half  
½ package onion soup mix  
1 cup fresh Parmesan cheese, grated

### Instructions

Place flour in bag, add meat, and shake until thoroughly covered. In large frying pan, heat olive oil until it's almost, but not quite, smoking. Place meat in pan and brown on all sides. Just before meat is completely browned, add 2 pats of butter to oil to finish browning. Remove and drain and cook meat in wine in a shallow sauté pan, covered, on medium-low heat for about 15 minutes to tenderize. Turn occasionally.

Put chopped tomatoes, rosemary, salt, pepper, and bouillon cubes in water and bring to a boil. Add rice and cook according to directions on rice package. Stir and fluff to distribute rosemary and tomatoes evenly.

In a sauté pan on low heat, blend cream, onion soup mix, and half of the Parmesan cheese. Stir constantly until the mixture is smooth and the cheese is melted into the sauce. Salt to taste. Use white pepper, if desired. Serve squirrel over a bed of rice, spoon sauce over top, and garnish with remaining Parmesan cheese.



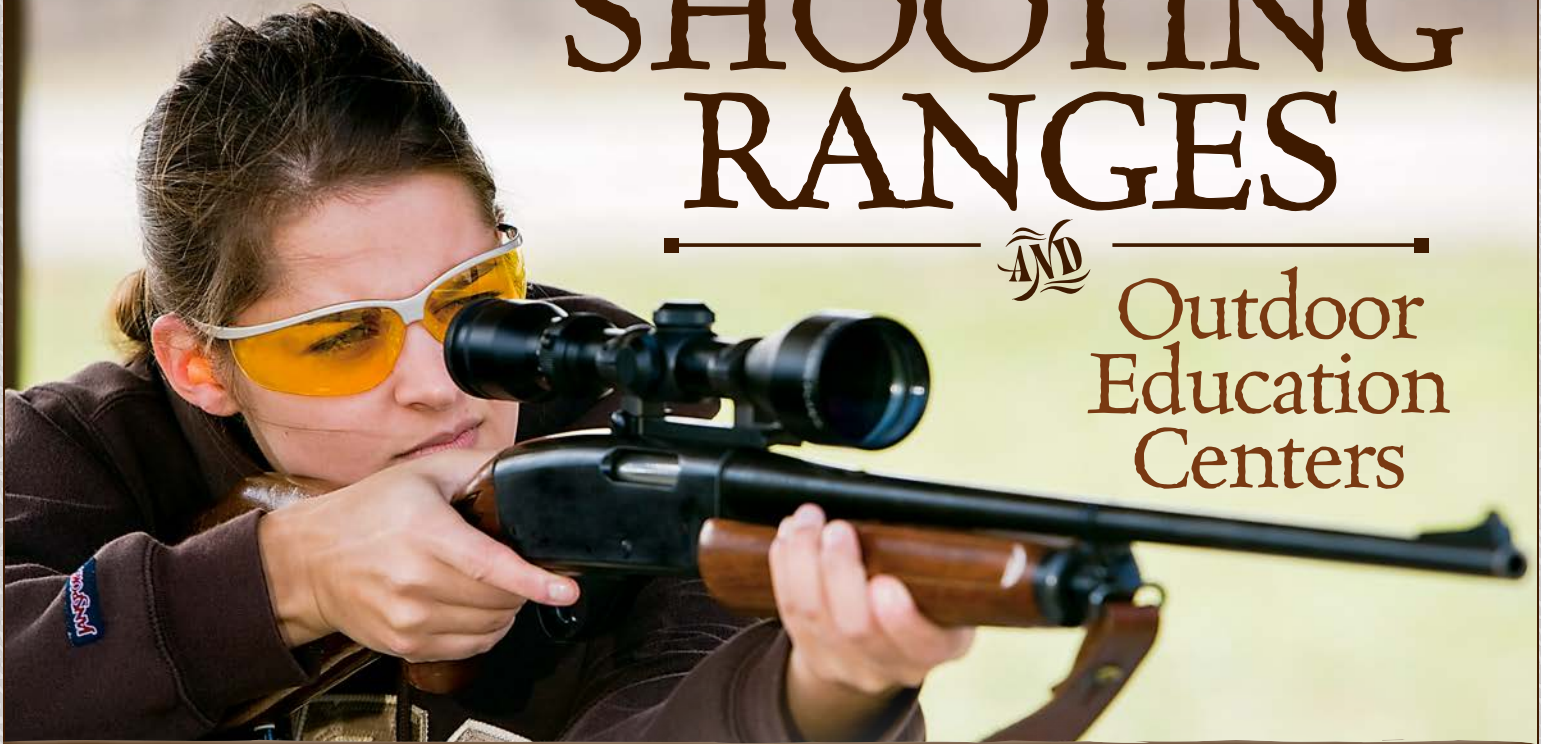


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816-271-3100

## Ozark Region

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417-256-7161

## Southeast Region

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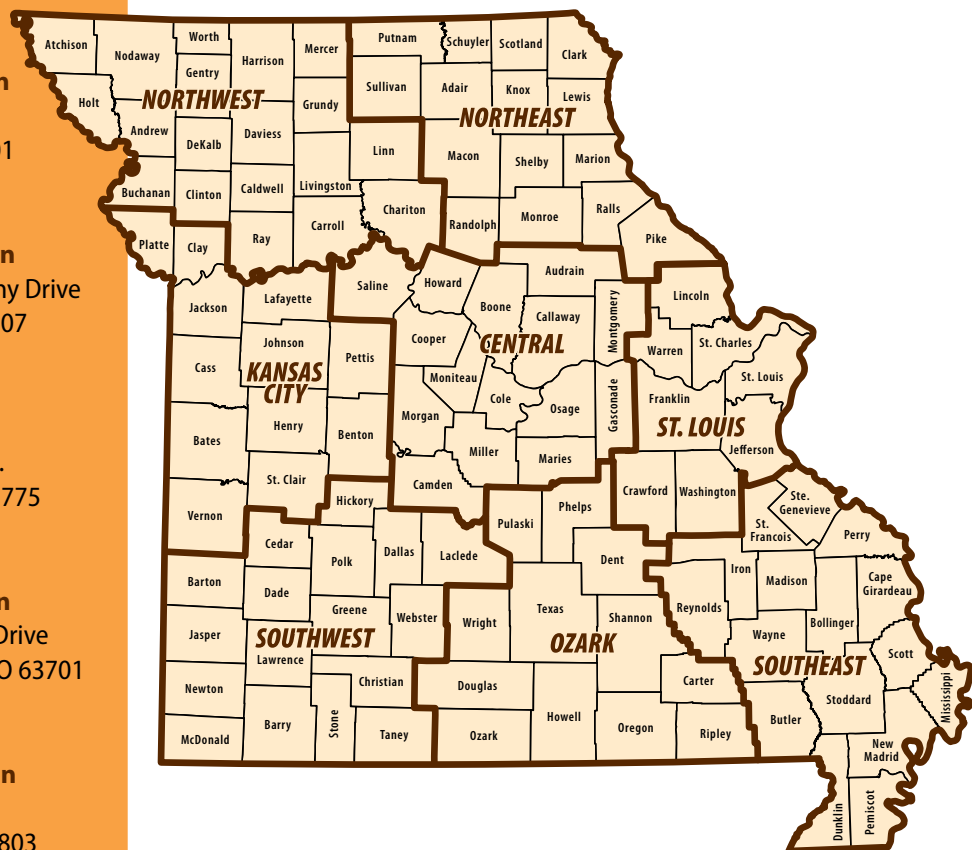
## Southwest Region

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MDC works with you and for you to sustain healthy forests, fish, and wildlife. If you have a conservation question, need help managing your property for wildlife, or would like to speak with your local conservation agent, call the nearest office listed in the sidebar to the left. For phone numbers and email addresses of MDC staff in your county, use the "Local Contact" feature at [mdc.mo.gov](http://mdc.mo.gov).



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